



COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE®

Order Sons of Italy in America®

219 E Street, N.E. • Washington, D.C. 20002
(202) 547-2900 • (202) 546-8168 (FAX) • www.osia.org

March 23, 2016

Mr. Gilbert Cedillo
Los Angeles City Council
City Hall Office
200 N. Spring St., Room 460
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Council Member Cedillo:

On behalf of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), I would like to express our regret that the City of Los Angeles voted to approve the motion Council File 15-1343, which proposes to replace the second Monday of October—the federal Columbus Day holiday—as Indigenous Peoples' Day. OSIA is the largest organization of Italian Americans in North America, representing an estimated 26 million Americans of Italian heritage. Our mission is to promote the Italian culture, heritage, and contributions that our ancestors have made to this great country and the world. We are shocked and appalled that you, in your official capacity, would entertain any measure that discredits Christopher Columbus and, in effect, slight the contributions that Italian Americans have made to this country and the development of western civilization as a whole.

Since 1937, Columbus Day has been a federally recognized holiday that celebrates a world-changing vision. In 1492, following the rise of the Ottoman Empire, which made it virtually impossible for Europeans to trade with Asia, it was Columbus who set out West in hopes of finding a new path East. Although it is generally understood that Christopher Columbus was not the first person to step foot on American soil, it goes without saying that his voyage is the one that changed the world. It was he who opened up a new land of opportunity to the *oppressed* masses of Europe. His arrival marks the time in history when Europeans began to make important worldly contributions, such as those in art, law, government, and economics that have become the basic foundations of this great nation. It is for those contributions that the United States government recognized our favorite son of Genoa, Italy.

For Italian Americans, as well as other immigrant groups who came over as oppressed masses in the early 20th century, it was Columbus who served as their champion and gave them hope of a new life, one with opportunity. Thus, for Americans of Italian descent, Columbus Day serves as an opportunity to celebrate our ancestors and the struggles they overcame to assimilate into American culture. The motion that was approved by the Arts, Parks and River Committee is proposing to take away the symbol of their very identity and the contributions they have made since the early 1900s.

There are certainly questionable conflicting historical facts surrounding Christopher Columbus and his colonization of the Americas. I understand that this was a push by Native American groups to demonize Columbus as a slave trader who spread disease among the indigenous peoples. They proclaim the same skewed arguments that Howard Zinn presented in his one-sided tale of Columbus in *A People's History of the United States*. Zinn's story, as well as the story of the modern-day American Indian, presents an overly simplistic view that is completely out of context to the time in which he lived. Surely you, as an elected council member of a great city, realize the conundrum of applying a 21st century

C.F. 15-1343
BY _____
CITY CLERK
DEPUTY
2017 JUL 27 PM 12:09
RECEIVED
CITY CLERK'S OFFICE

understanding of morality to the people of the 15th century. Though we recognize that gruesome incidents took place and cannot be condoned, this was no different from how Europeans treated other Europeans or Native Americans treated other Native Americans at that point in time. Today's concept of individual rights was simply nonexistent during the 15th century. Does the City of Los Angeles plan on desecrating George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and our forefathers at large for owning slaves their entire lives?

We wish that you would reconsider your resolution that renames Columbus Day. We are in full support of recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day. But why must it replace Columbus Day? With only 12 recognized federal holidays that leaves 353 possible days for the City of Los Angeles to recognize the contributions of Native Americans. Though we are in full support of this, it is equally unjust to take away from Italian Americans a day that represents *their* roots, history and contributions to this country. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed these sentiments best when he stated: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

I hope that you exhibit the same unbound courage and resolve that Columbus did when he set out in the summer of 1492 and urge you to withdraw this shortsighted motion and the undue injustice that is being done to Italian Americans in your city. Further, in celebration of social justice everywhere, I hope that you propose an ordinance that recognizes the contributions of indigenous people to this great nation and your city on a day other than Columbus Day.

Sincerely,



Kevin A. Caira
President, Commission for Social Justice
Order Sons of Italy in America

CC: Daniel J. Longo, National President, Order Sons of Italy in America
Lynn Lawrence-Murphy, State President, Grand Lodge of the California
Order Sons of Italy in America Supreme Council
Commission for Social Justice Board of Directors, Voting Members, and Resource Persons
Los Angeles City Council
Eric Garcetti, Mayor of Los Angeles

Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction FICTION: COLUMBUS DID NOT DISCOVER THE AMERICAS. THE VIKINGS DID.
FACT:

In 1950, a map surfaced in Europe that shows the “Island of Vinland” in the northwest Atlantic Ocean. The map’s text in Medieval Latin explains that Leif Erickson and his Vikings found Vinland in the year 1000 A.D. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., dates the map’s parchment to around 1434 A.D. – nearly 60 years before Columbus’ first voyage. But when researchers at London’s University College used a laser technique to test the map’s ink, they found it contained a chemical substance called anatase, which was not synthesized until 1923, proving that the map is a forgery. Did Columbus “discover” America? In every significant way, he did. Even if others visited the continent sporadically before he did, their voyages had no historical significance. Columbus’ voyages, however, marked the end of thousands of years of isolation between the Western Hemisphere and the rest of the world. The recorded history of the Americas and the Caribbean starts with Columbus.

FICTION: COLUMBUS FOUND SOPHISTICATED NATIVE CIVILIZATIONS. FACT: Most of the native tribes Columbus found were hunter-gatherers who engaged in bloody tribal wars and, in the case of the Arawaks, Caribs and Canibs, slavery, torture and cannibalism. To survive, the native populations depended on “slash-and-burn” cultivation of the land along with hunting, fishing and collecting edible wild plants, seeds and shellfish. They had no written language, history or literature. In their struggle for survival, these peoples were not the champions of the environment that they are often portrayed as today.

FICTION: COLUMBUS WAS A SLAVE-TRADER. FACT: Columbus never owned any slaves or brought any to the Western Hemisphere from Africa. During his first voyage in 1492, Columbus landed on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). There, with the help of a tribe of friendly Taino Indians, he built a fort called Navidad and left 40 of his crew there when he returned to Spain in January 1493. On his return to Hispaniola in November 1493, he learned that all his men had been massacred by another Taino tribe. Columbus and his men fought with these Indians, capturing about 2,000 and in 1495, sent 500 of these prisoners of war (POW) to Spain to be sold as slaves, as was the custom in 15th century Europe. He sent another 30 Indian POWs to Spain the following year, but the Spanish monarchs ordered him to stop the practice and he never again sent Indians to Europe to be sold as slaves. It is important to note that slavery was not unique to Europe. Columbus found it practiced in the Caribbean by the Caribs and Canibs who made slaves of the tribes they conquered and also ate their victims. (Hence the word “cannibal”.) Later Spanish explorers in Mexico and Central America found that even the more advanced civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas and Mayans kept slaves. These civilizations also practiced torture, ritual murder and the human sacrifice of their own women and children as well as of prisoners of war. Such practices horrified the Spanish and caused them to look down on native cultures. In fact, the Spanish arrival in the New World was the decisive factor that eventually ended human sacrifice and cannibalism there.

FICTION: COLUMBUS WAS A RACIST. FACT: No evidence indicates that Columbus thought the islanders he met were racially inferior in any way. In fact, in the journal of his first voyage, Columbus describes the Tainos and other tribes as “well-made with fine shapes and faces...their eyes were large and very beautiful...straight-limbed without exception and handsomely shaped...” He praises their generosity, innocence and intelligence, saying they could “readily become Christians as they have a good

understanding.” Initially, Columbus had friendly relations with the five Taino tribes he met during his first voyage. These relations soured with four of the five tribes after he found the colony of men he had left behind in the fort Navidad had been slaughtered. He became good friends, however, with one tribe of Tainos led by Chief Guacanagari, who helped Columbus build his fort and fought alongside Columbus against the Taino tribes that wanted to kill the Europeans. Guacanagari paid heavily for his friendship with Columbus. His village was burned; he was wounded in battle and fled to the mountains where he died.

FICTION: COLUMBUS COMMITTED GENOCIDE. FACT: The destruction of the native populations of North and South America over the centuries is a complex historical tragedy. No one knows exactly how many people were here when the Europeans arrived. The numbers vary from 8 million to 145 million. Many researchers believe the number to be around 40 million. Columbus made four voyages to the Caribbean in a twelve-year period (1492-1504), spending from only seven months to two years and nine months (including the year he was shipwrecked on his fourth voyage.) It is inconceivable that he could have killed millions of people in so short a time. Responsibility for the deaths of many thousands of natives can justly be attributed to the Spanish conquistadors and other Europeans who followed Columbus here. But even in this case, since there were more natives than Europeans, the loss of millions of lives could not have been caused by the Spaniards’ warfare and forced labor alone. 4 In fact, most of the native populations perished because they lacked immunity to such diseases as small pox, typhoid and diphtheria as well as the non-fatal childhood diseases of measles and mumps that they caught from the Spanish explorers. These diseases were not transmitted deliberately and cannot be considered a tool of genocide. Scholars estimate that 80% of those who died were infected without ever seeing a white man. Tragic as this epidemic was, it also bears remembering that prior to the Europeans’ arrival, the Western Hemisphere was no Garden of Eden. New medical research on pre-Columbian mummies in Peru, Chile and remote areas far from the early European colonies reveals that tuberculosis, long thought European in origin, was rampant among the Indian tribes before the arrival of Columbus. Arthritis, periodontal disease and significant bone erosion also afflicted the native populations well before the voyages of Columbus and other Europeans. Most adults, only in their 20s and 30s, had terrible teeth or none at all. Very few lived past age 40. The native populations gave the early explorers syphilis, which they brought back to Europe. Clearly, blaming Columbus for the extermination of the native populations is as fair as blaming the native populations for killing people who die from using tobacco and cocaine, which the natives introduced to the Europeans.

FICTION: COLUMBUS DESTROYED THE BALANCE BETWEEN MAN & NATURE. FACT: Columbus and the other Europeans brought with them Old World agricultural techniques, including crop rotation and animal breeding. They also introduced new tools (including the wheel) as well as new plants and domesticated animals, including the horse. These imports led to improved farming methods, a greater diversity of crops and a more dependable food supply that benefited the native populations. Perfected over the centuries, they have helped make the nations in the Western Hemisphere a significant source of food for the rest of the world. FICTION: COLUMBUS AND OTHER EUROPEANS STOLE THE NATIVES’ LAND. FACT: A sad fact of human civilization is that powerful nations usurp the land of the vanquished. The Spanish conquistadors who followed Columbus in the 16th and 17th centuries were establishing an empire through military conquest. They did what Egypt, Persia, Rome and China did before them in the Middle East, Europe and Asia. They also did what the Aztecs, Mayans, Incas and many North American Indians did in the Americas. “The Iroquois Federation in North America subjugated so many Indians,”

writes Richard Gambino, "that historian Francis Parkman calls them 'the Romans of the New World.'" But Columbus himself had no part in this. It is worth pointing out that the Europeans brought considerable benefits to Latin America. Their arrival gave the entire continent a common language, while in North America, land taken from the Iroquois and other tribes eventually became the United States, a haven for the poor and oppressed from all over the world, who find opportunities and freedoms here that their own countries deny them. And it all

July, 23, 2017

C.F. 15-1343

To whom it may concern,

I wish to let it be known that not all Italian-Americans believe Columbus Day should be saved. I am the President of a local Son's of Italy (SOI) Lodge in the SF Bay Area and this issue of Columbus Day is a bone of contention with me. I am a younger SOI President/member who experienced a different presentation and education about Columbus than older generations. Below is a letter I sent to the SOI Social Justice Committee and to SOI's California newspaper, *Il Leone*. Interestingly, I received no response from either entity.

I am forwarding this the letter to you to make it be known that as a proud Italian-American I am anti-Columbus Day and I wholeheartedly encourage the City of Los Angeles to continue on their path to change Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day.

Not all Italians love Columbus.

Gina LoVecchio

To whom it may concern,

First and foremost I am speaking for myself and not the Sons of Italy lodge I am president of. Though I know of other Sons of Italy members (both within my lodge and without) that feel the same as myself, I am speaking only for me.

I am a very proud second generation Italian-American who has close ties with my roots. I love and appreciate my culture and heritage. However, when people speak of Christopher Columbus in a positive light I become embarrassed of my heritage.

It is a disservice to Italian-Americans to assume that we *all* believe that Columbus should be celebrated. The man landed on an island he claimed to "discover" and proceeded to wreak havoc for the peoples and the cultures already established there. Murder, rape, and the decimation of other's cultures are not things I wish to celebrate. The Italians themselves didn't event want to support Columbus' voyage and he had to go begging for funds until Spain decided to front him the money - as long as they could claim the land for themselves.

RECEIVED
CITY CLERK'S OFFICE
2017 JUL 27 PM 12:10
CITY CLERK
BY _____
DEPUTY

So, Christopher Columbus may have been Italian, but he was working for the Queen of Spain, landed in what he thought was India (hence, the name "Indians"), discovered nothing, and was a menace to a society already in existence.

No, I do not celebrate Columbus Day. It is a day of shame and apology for me. For me, and many others. So, please don't assume that because I'm a proud Italian-American I will support the continuance of Columbus Day.

Sincerely,

Gina Elizabeth LoVecchio